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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002151

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: GOVERNOR OF KEBBI'S THOUGHTS ON THE
NIGERIAN POLITICAL SCENE

REF: ABUJA 1446

(U) Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter; Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The Governor of Kebbi, Mohammed Aleiro, called on Ambassador Jeter on August 26. Aleiro was in Abuja prior to his trip with President Obasanjo to China. In addition to a discussion of Kebbi-specific issues, Aleiro stated that he did not believe Babangida would run against Obasanjo in 2003. He also said rumors that Governor Makarfi would challenge the Vice President for his position were untrue. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) The Governor of Kebbi, Mohammed Aleiro, called on Ambassador Jeter on August 26. Aleiro thanked the Ambassador for his June trip to Kebbi State (Reftel), and hoped to have further discussions regarding agriculture, education, and health care for Kebbi. The Ambassador informed the Governor about the Embassy's Self-Help program, the recently signed USD 18.5m agreement between USAID and the National Planning Commission and other assistance efforts by the Mission. The Ambassador also offered to arrange a meeting for the Governor and his staff with USAID to discuss agricultural development, education and healthcare. Aleiro asked about the value of a trip to the United States to seek investment and cooperative agreements for Kebbi. Ambassador Jeter noted that other governors had done so with some success, and offered to help arrange a visit if the Governor was so inclined.

3. (C) The Ambassador mentioned his desire to recommend to the President a national conference on HIV/AIDS, which would include all of Nigeria's governors and relevant Cabinet officials, to sensitize the Nigerian populace on the issue. Governor Aleiro was extremely supportive, and stated that he would begin discussing this idea with his fellow governors. The Ambassador also mentioned that it appeared as though Peace Corps would be returning to Nigeria, and offered that Kebbi State might be a good place for the Corps to consider, once it begins to expand its operations out of Plateau State. Aleiro agreed, and pointed out that Kebbi did not suffer from the type of security concerns of many other states.

4. (C) The Ambassador, noting that he understood that President Obasanjo had originally been the "candidate of the North," asked if it was true that the President was now unpopular in the North. Aleiro, who belongs to the "opposition APP party," said this was "quite true," but opined that there was no viable alternative to Obasanjo. Obasanjo had kept Nigeria united and had sustained democracy. Aleiro further explained that there was a "certain group in the North" that had always been in or been connected to power in Nigeria, but were not in power now. This group, the Governor lamented, was agitating against the President. However, Obasanjo had opposed resource control efforts by the South-South states, a position supported by Northerners, and many in the South-East. Obasanjo's strong federalism was also in the interest of the North, the Governor added. While Obasanjo had demonstrated poor performance on roads, electricity, universal basic education and security thus far, the Governor praised the President's firm support for stability and national unity, positions that were critical for Nigeria, especially now. Thus, Aleiro wanted Obasanjo to continue as President.

5. (C) The Ambassador asked whether the Governor believed former Head of State Babangida (IBB) would run against Obasanjo in 2003. Aleiro said no, and flatly remarked, "(His) record in government is nothing to write home about." Aleiro said IBB might push a candidate he could control, but thought most of IBB's political machinations were for his own security and assets; a hedge against any who might try to use him as a political scapegoat. Eventually, all of IBB's political associations would merge with PDP (the President's party), Aleiro thought. He added that the south-west, and in fact all of Nigeria, would never forget Babangida's annulment of the election in 1993, which had been accepted as free and

fair throughout Nigeria.

16. (C) Ambassador Jeter asked the Governor about complaints of the North being marginalized in Nigerian politics. Aleiro dismissed this as a "misperception of time and situation" among certain groups in the North. The North had ruled Nigeria for a long time, and now had to accept that power needed to be shared in the country.

17. (C) The Ambassador then asked if the Governor believed the President might select another running-mate in the place of Vice President Atiku Abubakar, such as Governor Makarfi of Kaduna State. Aleiro stated that a lot of influential individuals were pushing Makarfi to challenge the Vice President, but he did not believe Makarfi would do so. (Makarfi, in fact, has publicly disavowed any intention of challenging the VP.) First, Atiku was a consummate politician, and the President could not run a campaign successfully without him. The VP had huge political backing from many within the PDP, formerly the People's Democratic Movement, and was seen as the political successor of the late Shehu Yusa Yar'adua. The VP was also extremely loyal to the President. Secondly, according to Aleiro, Makarfi had stated both to the VP directly and to others that he would not campaign for the VP's job. According to Aleiro, Makarfi had said he was not interested in the job as long as Atiku was in it, and was more focused on continuing as governor in his State.

18. (C) COMMENT: Aleiro's comments were revealing. It was a surprise to hear a Northern Governor, and a member of the APP party, unambiguously and strongly state his support for President Obasanjo. His criticisms, as well as his compliments, of the present Administration were thoughtful, and seemed to be an honest assessment. END COMMENT.
Jeter